

## A FALSE MOVE.

By E. B.

I.

A young man of fair appearance and good manners is a valuable personage anywhere; but never more so than in a little country town. This truth was fully acknowledged and acted on by the girls in Milford; and young Edgar Holden, the head clerk in Mr. Mitchell's dry-goods store, was a lion in his way. Nature had been kind to him in the matter of personal endowments, bestowing a broad, white forehead, bright, dark eyes, and various pleasing et cetera. Perhaps her liberality in these outward adornings drove her to something like parsimoniousness in the interior plenishing. His head was well enough, not lacking in sense, or shrewdness; but his heart had been fashioned after a very contracted pattern. It was large enough to accommodate comfortably just one individual—Mr. Holden himself.

The girls, however, did not suspect this, nor was he aware of the fact. He enjoyed his popularity, his invitations, and the smiles of the fair, without dreaming that he was other than an honorable, high-minded young fellow. Nor did his care for the leading numeral at once develop itself; for he fell in love, as deeply as it was in him to do, with Helen Lyndsay, the oldest daughter of a large, and by no means prosperous family.

There were two fine dry-goods stores in Milford, rivals in show and business, and several minor establishments. Over the very least of these presided Mr. Lyndsay, Helen's father, assisted by an intermittent clerk. Poor man! It was pitiful to see him, year after year, growing gray and bent among his slender stock; his serious face brightening at sight of an infrequent customer, and his slow' speech essaying the blandishments that should induce a purchase. But the pathos of the affair was lost on the Milfordites, among whom his store was a jest and by-word. Some sort of sales must have been made there, at intervals, to somebody, however, for Mr. Lyndsay occasionally got in a new piece of

goods, and the family lived along, they hardly knew how.

As Helen grew up, affairs improved a little. She developed an unusual taste for music, cultivated by many turns and stratagems, but reaching, at least, a considerable degree of excellence. Her voice, especially, was beautiful, and went straight to the listener's heart. She was promoted to playing the organ, with a modest stipend therefor; she began to give lessons, and to be somewhat prominent in the youthful circles from her musical attainments. About this time, too, her attire was visibly brightened.

"How Helen Lyndsay has improved in her looks!" exclaimed Mary Eames, to her devoted friend, Matilda Mitchell. "In that new garnet merino she is almost handsome!"

"I don't know whether her looks have improved, or only her clothing," replied Matilda. "She would always have been pretty if she had been dressed like other people."

"Yes," said Mary, "I know. When any old, forsaken piece of lead-color, or washed-out green, had lain in the store long enough, Helen used to have a dress made from it. I wonder who selected Mr. Lyndsay's goods in the beginning!"

"Couldn't say," replied Matilda, laughing. "You must go to the oldest inhabitant for that."

But Matilda did not laugh when it became apparent that the garnet merino, or the pretty loops which it set off, had made an impression on Edgar Holden's heart. She was thought, among the girls, to be very well disposed toward her father's handsome clerk. It happened, naturally enough, that he saw her often and familiarly; accompanied her to lectures and evening meetings; and Matilda had not taken these attentions as mere matters of course. Though by no means ill-natured, she was quite aware of the difference between her father's handsome establishment, with its plate-glass windows, its lavish display, and numerous clerks, and Mr. Lyndsay's melancholy little den; she felt all the easy

superiority of a girl to whom merinoes, garnet, or otherwise, were mere everyday affairs. She might have expected, too, that Edgar would have sufficient esprit de corps to stand by his employers. But it was not to be. Helen Lyndsay brushed back her fair tresses from her smooth brow, gave a few soft glances from her blue eyes, and the work was done. Edgar was a captive.

The sunshine of Helen's happiness brightened the whole household. Mrs. Lyndsay began to feel for her children the hopes that had long since died out for herself. "Edgar will do well," prophesied Mr. Lyndsay; "he's a young man that's bound to succeed." Success for any of its members would make a delightful variety in the family, the mother felt; and if Helen prospered, her brother and sisters would reap the comforts of it, too. Meanwhile, no heroine of romance ever cherished a tenderer, more devoted passion than warmed the young girl's heart. Edgar was so handsome, so superior, so noble—it was so generous of him, who could have had anybody, to choose her! These were her articles of faith; and in return Edgar was very fond of her, proud of her pretty face, exultant in her voice.

The first break in their felicity was caused by the offer, to the lover, of a good position in New York. He must go, that they both knew at once—it would never do to neglect such advancement. But the parting was cruel. Nothing could have consoled them under it but the feeling, on Edgar's part, that he was going to make a home for his beloved; on hers, that his absence would but bring them sooner together. He was to work, and save, and prosper, toward the one great end; while she, in her sphere, would love him faithfully, and strive to grow worthier of him every day.

II.

Helen must be allowed, of course, a little time to cry in her own room when her adored was really gone; but she soon roused herself, and came back to everyday duties. She tidied the sitting-room, kept the parlor in order, helped her mother with the sewing, and gave faithful care to her steadily-increasing class. With all this, she found time for frequent glances at Edgar's picture, and the pearl ring he had given her—how he wanted to make it a diamond!—and for

reading, again and again, his precious letters.

"What shall we ever do without Helen?" Mrs. Lyndsay would say to her husband. "I am afraid to think of it."

"We won't think of it," he answered. "She is not going just yet, at any rate."

No, not just yet. For the first few weeks, while all was yet unfamiliar and even a little dreary, Edgar turned with ardor to his beloved. His letters were frequent, full of tender remembrance and fond anticipations. But he grew accustomed to the new position, and came to feel himself a part of the vast and brilliant life that surged through the city streets, esteem for his old self and old associations grew weaker.

Almost any boarding-house can boast a pretty girl or so, and that to which Edgar's fortune had directed him did not differ, in this respect, from others. One young lady, who sat opposite him at table, especially attracted his regards. She was tall and finely-shaped, with dark eyes, and the most entire and perfect self-possession. Edgar, always sensitive to female beauty, could not but admire her well- turned waist, and the graceful slope of her shoulders. As soon as opportunity offered, he inquired her name of his landlady.

"Oh! that's Miss Minot, and her mother sits next her; the quiet, middle-aged lady, who is always crocheting tidies."

"I haven't observed," said Edgar, smiling. "She does not crochet at table, perhaps."

"That reminds me," said Mrs. Lord. "Why don't you come into the parlor of an evening? It would be so much more sociable for you; and it's hardly gallant to the young ladies to keep to yourself as you do. You'll find we have a very pleasant family. Miss Minot is a splendid girl."

"She looks it, certainly."

"You think so? Well, I should suppose you would. I don't see how any one can help it. It would hardly do, perhaps, for me to tell what she said yesterday about you."

"Hardly," said Edgar. "She, probably, did not intend that it should be repeated."

"Oh! it was no harm—but I shall be discreet." Edgar did not urge, though he would have really liked to know what impression he had made on that distinguished-looking girl. It was not unfavorable, judging from the reception she gave him, when, obedient to Mrs. Lord's hint, he made his debut in the parlor the next evening. Every one, indeed, met him with friendliness; the two Miss Raynolds, one pretty, and the other plain, were most amiable; and their mamma, the large lady with the Roman nose, spoke feelingly of the loneliness of a young man without home or family ties in the place where business has called him. Emily Minot smiled at this tender sympathy; and Mrs. Raynor saw the smile, and felt aggrieved, all the more that the offender presently absorbed the new-comer's attention.

"How shockingly Emily Minot flirts with every man she meets," she observed to Miss Burt, a maiden lady sitting near. "I wonder her mother can let her go on so."

"She has very little to say about it, I fancy. Emily does not consult her."

"I'm afraid not. It's sad—sad. I hope I shall never lose my influence over my children in that way."

Meanwhile, Emily talked with Mr. Holden. "I am not at all of Mrs. Raynor's mind," she said, smiling. "I don't consider you in the least an object of sympathy."

"Certainly not, at present. I am an object of envy, rather."

"A truce to compliments, pray; I was speaking in good faith. A man—a young man—is really to be envied. The world lies before him, he has his destiny in his

own hands. So different from us poor women, who must just sit still and see what will happen!"

"You exaggerate our power, I think; circumstances control us oftener than we circumstances. And when we are strongest, most successful, we are ready to lay it at the feet of those same 'poor women,' and ask our fate from their lips."

"You can't break away from conventional prettiness of speech, I see; but I shall adhere to my text. A man worthy the name will not hang his hopes on anything but his own will. He can make life much what he chooses to have it. But for us, there is no resource—unless we could find Aladdin's lamp."

"And what should you ask for, then?"

"More than I can tell you, at such short notice. Pomp, power, place—these are the sum. I'll spare you the details. How very warm it is!" she added, fanning herself. "Most unusual, for the season. I believe the first use I should make of my gift would be to order in a tray of ice creams."

A year later Edgar would have seen through this trick, and remained undisturbed by it; but now it seemed a charming idea to realize the naively-spoken wish. A conference with the landlady, a message to the nearest confectioner, and the ices appeared. Miss Minot beamed sweetly upon Edgar, and called Edgar a benevolent genii. Mrs. Raynor and her daughters exchanged glances; they understood the *modus operandi* perfectly. However, as the ices were there, they might as well partake of them.

Edgar's friendship with Miss Minot progressed rapidly from this evening; he was introduced to others, and soon had a circle of lady acquaintances. More or less pretty, they dazzled him by fashionable dress, by grace of manner, and "air." The image of Helen, busied with domestic cares, or going from house to house, attending to her scholars, grew less attractive. His letters were fewer, and pleaded business in excuse.

As months went on, indulgences of various sorts absorbed his means. It was

absurd, he told himself, to try to save from such a salary. It did not more than keep him comfortably, alone. He had been very weak to bind himself, at his age, by any plans of marriage. Time enough for that, years hence, if he prospered. Or, at any rate, he ought to have chosen a very different sort of girl. A man's wife, if she did not bring him fortune, ought to be something in herself—should have position and connections, air and aplomb. He should shudder to have Miss Minot know about that horrid little store, and the music-lessons. But he had not understood his own tastes, nor his own value, in those days. It was a bad bargain—but he must make the best of it. By this time the intervals between the letters were very long. Then, little by little, the thought occurred, "Must so poor a bargain be adhered to? Were there no means of escape from it? Was a mere bit of boy's folly, like that, to hamper him all his days?" Breaking an engagement was no new thing; it had been done often enough before. So a week passed, two, three, and no letter came.

"Why doesn't Edgar write, I wonder?" said Mrs. Lyndsay.

"I don't know, mother," Helen answered.

"Perhaps he is ill."

"No; I don't think it can be that. We should have heard."

"Well, then, I must say," began Mrs. Lyndsay.

"Don't, mother," pleaded Helen. "Don't say anything. We shall know all soon enough." Mrs. Lyndsay was silent; but her heart ached for her child. And Helen looked so anxiously for a letter. Every thought, every occupation, tended toward the one event of mail-time. If her father came in at an unusual hour; if one of the children brought home a composition in its hand from school, her heart leaped up in hope that the missive had arrived at last. But nothing came.

III.

One bright morning Helen went out on her usual round; however sick her

heart, lessons must be attended to. On the way she encountered Mary Eames.

"I suppose you are feeling very bright," said the latter.

"Not particularly," answered Helen. "Why should I?"

"What hypocrisy! Why, because Edgar has come, and is twice as handsome as he used to be. Isn't that reason enough?"

"Edgar!" exclaimed Helen, turning very pale. "Is it possible—are you sure?"

"Of course, I am; I talked with him for ten minutes just now, at Mitchell's. You don't mean to say you didn't know?"

"Yes," replied Helen. "I had not heard. Good-by! I must go on."

Mary looked after her. "How strange!" she thought. "Can they have quarreled, or what is the matter?"

Helen got through her duties in some fashion, and hurried home. She longed, yet dreaded, to meet Edgar on the way; but she might have spared both hopes and fears. He was amusing himself in the Mitchell's croquet-ground with Matilda and two or three other girls.

Not without thoughts of her, however, and plans respecting his course of action. He had come, intending to see her; to have some sort of explanation; and to get back his freedom. She would give it, he was assured, without an explicit demand. But now that he was here, the affair seemed an awkward one to manage; there might be an unpleasant scene, perhaps, if Helen should not look at it as reasonably as he did. Possibly, too, her father might be indignant. So he put off the interview from day to day.

While he waited, conjecture was busy as to the cause of the trouble between the youthful pair. Mary Eames had not been slow to report her interview with Helen, and the girls were full of interest and curiosity. Matilda allowed some



foolish fancies to spring up in her mind, and made herself as charming as possible. Edgar found her society an acceptable refuge from annoying thoughts; he also discerned, or imagined, a resemblance in her to his idol, Emily Minot, and admired her accordingly.

All this time Helen watched and waited at home, hoping against hope, wondering if he had heard anything against her; if he was offended, or what could be the cause of this cruel change.

Day went by, and then Edgar returned to town, without having once seen her. He had decided that it would be easier to write than speak; but writing was not easy. As well let the whole thing pass, perhaps; Helen must understand it pretty well by this time. He should like his letters, to be sure; they were silly things, and had better be destroyed—but it was no great matter. The Lyndsays were not the sort of people ever to use them against him. As for his picture, and the pearl ring, and the few other trifles he had given her, she was very welcome to them, if she cared to keep them.

She did not care, it seemed. Shortly after his return, he received a packet containing all, with a few lines, requesting the return of Helen's own letters. He had felt free enough before, but acknowledged that it was, perhaps, best the affair should be formally ended.

So Helen was left to heal her wounded heart as best she might; to console herself for the destruction of her hopes, by convincing her reason of the unworthiness of their object. It was a hard task upon her. The parents, seeing her sad face, her poor little efforts after cheerfulness, execrated bitterly the cause of the trouble, but they could do nothing. She and they must wait for the effects of time.

There was now nothing in the way of Edgar's addresses to Miss Minot. A mixture of hope and uncertainty in the pursuit rendered it peculiarly fascinating to his temperament. That he was personally not unacceptable to her, he was sure; she had long treated him with the friendliest regard, which had sometimes, he thought, a tinge of tenderer meaning. But then she was

ambitious; she yearned with a strong yearning after the pomps and vanities of the world. Well, there would be all the more glory in winning her, spite of these prepossessions. He did not stop to inquire whether she would remain contented after the winning; nor to justify to himself entirely the prudence of the step. That she had some means he was aware; then her connections were good, and would, doubtless, use their influence to aid her. He had hopes of advancement, too, in his own line; and then they need not marry immediately. Altogether, his plans were rather misty and confused; only one brilliant possibility, near at hand, constantly allured him—that of calling the superb woman, whom he so admired, his own. What a prize she would be! What lustre would she reflect upon him!

Lookers-on thought he had a fair chance of success; even Mrs. Minot, quiet and indifferent as she ordinarily was, grew uneasy.

"My dear," said she, timidly, "have you thought of all it would involve to marry this young man?"

"No, mamma, I haven't felt any call to think of it. Is it possible," she added, laughing, "that you know so little about your own child as that?"

"Well, Emily, I could not tell how it might be. He is very good-looking, and you are so much together."

"And I have a weak head, likely to be turned by good looks and by propinquity! Thank you for your high opinion! I am not infatuated enough, however, to marry a clerk on a salary, just yet. He's good-looking, as you say, and a very creditable attendant, and convenient in the way of bouquets, and carriage-hire, and concerts. There his vocation ends, so far as I am concerned."

"But do you think he understands it? Are you sure you are not misleading him?"

"He ought to; I have told him my views of life a dozen times. If he mistakes me, it is his own affair."

Thus tenderly did Edgar's idol treat his pretensions in the candor and privacy of her own family. To be sure, she used a little more ceremony when discussing them with himself a few days later; but the result was the same. He had been encouraged by an unwonted softness in her manner, and favoring circumstances of time and place, to speak his mind; and she had rejected him unequivocally, with many expressions of surprise. She had supposed they understood each other, that only a pleasant friendship existed between them. She was profuse in regrets, and hoped to retain his esteem. But Edgar's eyes were opened; he saw that she had chosen to amuse herself without one consideration for him, and he was bitterly indignant. If the image of Helen, perfect in her devotion, rose to his remembrance, we will not pity him too much for whatever was painful in the contrast. Longer reflection only confirmed his opinion. He recalled very clearly Miss Minot's acceptance of numerous little favors; nay, more, the hints she had given, which he had been so pleased and proud to act upon; and he did not doubt that he had been duped and freely used for her convenience. The conviction was not flattering to his vanity; perhaps, no injury to his heart alone could have so rankled.

In the very midst of this bitter and mortified feeling came most surprising news from Milford. Mr. Lyndsay's parents had died some months before, leaving to him the homestead farm. It was not a very desirable property, and there had been some delay in finding a purchaser. Meanwhile, oil had been discovered in the neighborhood, and speculators besieged Mr. Lyndsay on all hands. Fortunately, as it proved, he disregarded their temptations, got together all his available means, and began to bore. There was a brief period of great anxiety, followed by delicious exultation. At a comparatively trifling depth a flowing well burst forth; the fortune of the family was made. Adieu to the melancholy little shop, the music-lessons, and the small economies! Henceforward their path lay among the sunny places of life.

It was hard on Edgar, that any one must admit. I cannot tell you how tenderly the memory of Helen recurred to him, now that he knew her to be an heiress, surrounded by all the luxuries he doated on. If only he had kept faith a few weeks longer! Sometimes he half-meditated going back and pleading his cause again, but a certain instinct of failure withheld him. Like most of us, prone to

attribute his own faults to other people, he lays the blame of the affair on Emily Minot. If she had not been so vain, coquettish, hungry for conquest, all would yet be well.

On Saturday afternoon the wholesale store closed early, and Edgar, in common with hundreds of others, seeks the Central Park. Wending his way modestly on foot, he sometimes meets the Lyndsay carriage, and glances, unrecognized, at Helen, bright in recovered cheerfulness and beauty. How near, yet how unattainable! And he might have sat there by her side, might have shared in every luxury, every splendor! Nothing but his own act prevented it. -

No wonder that he walks home rather dejectedly, and finds his boarding-house an uninviting home, and its inmates sadly deficient in refinement. Of course, the world is not over for him yet; but he feels, with reason, that the highest prize is not likely to fall twice to his lot. And any moderate success he may yet achieve will always be embittered by the thought of that one false move and its consequences.



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